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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature of the family environment of women who have shifted from the role of wife/mother to that of wife/mother/student. The Moos Family Environment Scale and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale were utilized. Subjects were 39 married couples in which the wife was a returning college student and 39 couples in which the wife was primarily a homemaker. The results indicated that the families of women returning to college differed from the families of nonreturnees on a number of dimensions, suggesting both positive and negative aspects of the wife's returning to school. Such findings could have implications for counseling women who are returning to college. The need for longitudinal studies to determine the impact on the family created by a woman's return to school is suggested. (KA)

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Family Environments of Women Who Return to College*

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Running Head: Women Who Return to College

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Family Environments of Women Who Return to College

Can a marriage survive when the wife discovers her brain? The population of mature women returning to school after an extended period of wife/motherhood is growing every year. These returning women are often interested, dedicated students, showing seriousness of purpose, and strong motivation (Cless, 1975; Hechinger, 1975; Markus, 1974). Such high achievement requires an investment of time, energy, and ego into school which previously had been spent nurturing a family. This syphoning of energies into academic pursuits appears to have some positive effects on family relationships, in the form of increased admiration between spouses (Ballmer & Lee, 1971; Ballmer & Cozby, 1974), and possible financial advantages seen as a result of the wife's increased education (Watkins, 1974).

However, negative changes seem inevitable as well--changes which could cause serious disruptions in a marriage. In the Ballmer and Lee (1971) study, it was noted that while the husband admired his wife more as an individual after her return to school, he felt she no longer spent enough time with him, his sex life was deteriorating, and he saw her as much less dependent upon him, both financially and emotionally.

A follow-up of this study supported these findings, with additional evidence that the wife was also experiencing conflict between her own self-fulfillment and what she regards as "family duties" (Ballmer & Cozby, 1974). Other studies have pointed out that the majority of returning women find the school experience enjoyable and vastly rewarding on a

personal basis, but often suffer guilts and worries connected with taking time away from their homes and families (Letchworth, 19701 Markus, 1974). As Bardwick (1971) has pointed out, the return of a woman to higher education is somewhat different from her return to a working environment. The woman who returns to work is often satisfied with a relatively limited job as long as her motive to earn a little more money is met. In contrast, the woman who enters higher education is accepting a commitment to a high standard of performance and effort, which she and her husband are ill-prepared to accept (Lee, 1973). When she discovers that she is capable of fulfilling this commitment, and proceeds to demonstrate her academic proficiencies, it appears to present a threatening situation to both marriage partners.

Husbands of returning women appear to feel ambivalence about their wives' new role. They are proud of their wives' accomplishments, but are often made uncomfortable by their new autonomy (Ballmer & Cozby, 1974). Findings such as these tend to support the contention that as women's competencies increase and their dependencies decrease, marital conflicts arise (Liddick, 1973). Paul Bohannan (1972) suggests that this may be the result if the men have remained relatively static in their own personal growth. Bohannan sees the growth of partner and the static nature of the other as one of the six primary stages of marital discord.

The returning college woman seems to see herself during the initial college semesters as a homemaker who is going back to school, as opposed to the woman with more units behind her, who sees herself as a student with home responsibilities (LeFevre, 1973). This change in role perception brings personal conflict with it, on the part of the returnee

evidenced by the numbers of returning women seeking counseling on the campuses for what they see as attendant marital conflicts (Davis, personal communication, 1974; McGowan, personal communication, September 29, 1975; Peters, personal communication, November 6, 1975). The returnees feel selfish for neglecting the full responsibility of home, children, and husband, and for spending money for their own pleasure and self-fullfillment. Letchworth (1970) suggests that the guilt feelings stem from the women's conception of womanhood, and that their husbands, because they are products of the same culture, may maintain the guilt at a high level.

Such conflicts often center around the returnee's increasing awareness of the changing relationship between herself and her husband. Her old life style appears to be crumbling away, and she is torn between her desire to fulfill her own potential and her desire to be loved by the man in her life. The two appear to be mutually exclusive to many women raised in the old tradition. Form this point of view, intellectual achievement precludes femininity and attractiveness to the male. Cammaert (1973) states that most women experience emotional upheavals when choosing some alternative to a strictly family-focused life style. The very real danger of restructured relationships with family members is a strong possibility when women make this kind of role shift. Such anticipation of negative consequences for high achievement could well bring about the "motive to avoid success" (Horner, 1970, 1972; Monahan, Kuhn, & Shaver, 1973).

Considering the importance of the wife/mother role in our society, coupled with this exodus of older wives and mothers to educational pursuits, it seems relevant to explore the marriage and family relationships of women who return to college. At present, the literature is sparse

concerning such relationships. The studies which are available, while suggesting interesting implications, present little empirical data. Hechinger (1975). Letchworth (1970) and Watkins (1974) report only clinical or anecdotal findings, and Markus (1974) had no control group comparisons.

The primary purpose of the present study was to systematically investigate the nature of the family environments of women who have shifted from the role of wife/mother to that of wife/mother/student. The Moos (1974) Family Environment Scale (FES) allows for the measurement of family environments and was utilized in this study.

The FES assesses the following components of family environments:

1. Cohesiveness: The degree of commitment, supportiveness, and concern for one another within a family.

2. Expressiveness: The extent to which a family is encouraged and allowed to speak openly.

3. Conflict: The extent of open expression of anger and aggression within a family.

4. Independence: The extent to which family members are encouraged to be self-sufficient and to make decisions.

5. Achievement Orientation: The degree to which work and school activities are cast into an achievement oriented framework.

6. Intellectual-Cultural Orientation: The degree of concern within the family about political, social, intellectual, and cultural pursuits.

7. Active-Recreational Orientation: The extent to which the family actively participates in recreational and sporting activities.

8. Moral-Religious Emphasis: The extent to which the family discusses and emphasizes religious and ethical values.

9. Organization: The degree of structure within the family, in terms of financial planning, rules, and responsibilities.

10. Control: The extent of hierarchical structure and rigidity within the family, and the degree to which members order one another around.

On each of these ten dimensions the "real" or actual family climate, as well as the "ideal" or desired climate was assessed.

The FES was administered to groups of returning and non-returning women and their husbands. The study allows for an examination of the nature of any differences in the family climates of these groups, any discrepancies in the perception of real and ideal climates, and also areas of husband-wife disagreement.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 39 married couples in which the wife was a returning college student and 39 couples in which the wife was primarily a homemaker (total N = 156). The women were matched on the following dimensions: age, number years married, intact marriages, number of children living at home. The returnee women were selected from classes at a four-year university, while the non-returnee women were selected from PTA and church groups.

Procedure

Each member of the couple was given a packet containing the real and ideal forms of the FES and the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale (short form). Both forms of the FES are 90-item True-False instruments

intended to measure the ten dimensions of family environment. Each of the ten subscales is made up of nine questions. The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale is a 15-item scale intended to measure the general level of marital stability. The subjects were instructed to fill out the scales independently of their spouses. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was included for returning the material.

This procedure forms a 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design with type of group (returnee vs. non-returnee) and sex of subject (male vs. female) as between-subjects factors and the real vs. ideal FES form as a within-subjects factor.

Results

The results were analyzed using 2 X 2 X 2 analyses of variance. Since the study was concerned primarily with returnee-nonreturnee differences, only the main effect and interactions involving the returnee and non-returnee groups will be presented here.

Returnee-Nonreturnee Differences

The means on each of the FES Subscales for the returnee and non-returnee groups are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The returnee group perceived their family environments as having significantly less cohesiveness, more conflict, more independence, a greater intellectual-cultural orientation, a greater active recreational orientation and a lower moral-religious emphasis than did the non-returnee group. The returnees also tended to see their families as less concerned with

control than did the non-returnees.

There were no significant differences between the groups on the dimensions of achievement, expressiveness, and organization.

Group X Real-Ideal Interactions

Significant Group X Real-Ideal interactions were found for the cohesiveness, $F(1,152) = 4.85$, $p < .05$, and moral-religious, $F(1,152) = 10.57$, $p < .01$, dimensions. On both dimensions, the returnees perceived a significantly larger gap between real and ideal than did the non-returnees.

There were marginally significant ($p < .10$) interactions on the conflict, organization, and intellectual-cultural orientation subscales, indicating that the returnees tended to view these dimensions as farther from the ideal than did the non-returnees.

There were no significant Group X Sex interactions; also, there were no significant three-way interactions.

Marital Adjustment

The groups did not differ on marital adjustment, $F(1,152) = 2.44$, ns. The means of the returnee and non-returnee groups were 99.92 and 105.56, respectively.

Discussion

The results indicated that the families of women returning to college differed from the families of non-returnees on a number of dimensions, suggesting both positive and negative aspects of the wife returning to school.

On the positive side, members of the returnee group were more concerned with social-political issues and cultural-intellectual pursuits, more active in sporting and recreational activities, and were less rigid

and hierarchically structured than the non-returnees.

On the negative side, there was less cohesiveness and more conflict between family members of the returnee group. Also this group found the amount of organization within the family as less than they would prefer.

Such findings could have implications for counseling of women contemplating a return to college. Knowledge of the advantages seen might help in the decision to return to school. Also, knowledge of the negative aspects could make them less stressful. Perhaps the restructuring of family relationships, as mentioned by Cammaert (1973) could be made less disturbing if specific counseling for returning women were made available. An area for future research might be the effectiveness of such counseling.

The results generally agree with past findings in the literature. The fact that there was less cohesiveness and more independence perceived in the returnee families supports the findings of Ballmer and Lee (1971), Ballmer and Cozby (1974), and Markus (1974) indicating that re-evaluated priorities take some commitment away from the home when women become involved in academic interests.

The interest in intellectual, cultural, and social/political issues and the significant difference in encouragement toward self-sufficiency in the returnee families support the above mentioned studies, as well as Letchworth (1970).

Indications of increased conflict between members of returnee families also agree with these studies which found suggestions of threatened male status when wives become less dependent and have interests outside the family. These findings also support other investigators who indicate that with changes in role perception of the women may come both personal

and interpersonal conflict (Letchworth, 1970; Bardwick, 1971; Bohannan, 1972; Cammaert, 1973; Liddick, 1974).

The achievement orientation dimension revealed two results which were contrary to prediction. Not only did the returnees and non-returnees not differ on perceived achievement emphasis, but unlike the other dimensions, there was no significant difference found between perceived real and perceived ideal measures of achievement. These findings may indicate that each group saw their families as achievement oriented, but in different ways, and that this level of achievement approached what each group considered ideal.

The lack of a significant difference on the Marital Adjustment Scale suggests possibilities for further exploration, considering the differences that exist in family environments. Possibly, any overall differences in marital adjustment was balanced out due to the both positive and negative aspects of re-entry to college. Alternatively, it seems possible that there are moderating variables that would predict whether college attendance by the wife would either weaken or strengthen marital adjustment. Further research might attempt to identify marriages which would either benefit or suffer from a decision to return.

It is apparent that women who, prior to their re-entry, have been primarily homemakers, fulfilling the stereotypical role of nurturant, supportive, available wife and mother, encounter some rather unique complications when they enter the academic community. Many of these complications seem to center around the restructuring of family relationships, as this study has suggested. A longitudinal study of returning women, starting just prior to re-entry and continuing through to completion of their

education might be fruitful. Some of the currently uncontrolled factors, such as condition of the family environment prior to re-entry could be investigated, allowing for inferences of cause and effect that are beyond the scope of this study.

This paper does suggest that mature women currently entering colleges throughout the nation present a worthwhile field for further study in terms of how this new role affects the family unit, and husband-wife relationships in particular.

Table 1

Mean Scores on the Family Environment Scale

	Returnee Group	Non-Returnee Group	F*	p
Cohesiveness	7.243	7.865	8.463	.01
Expressiveness	6.455	6.205	1.190	ns
Conflict	3.089	2.346	7.797	.01
Independence	7.051	6.487	9.737	.01
Achievement-Orientation			1.971	ns
Intellectual-Cultural Orientation	7.319	6.333	15.858	.001
Active-Recreational Orientation	6.846	6.314	6.621	.05
Moral-Religious Emphasis	5.205	6.288	10.624	.01
Organization	6.307	6.461	<1	ns
Control	4.211	4.743	3.651	.10

Note: All F values based on 1 and 152 df.

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